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Red Line to Somewhere
Henry Waxman is onboard — sort of
by CHRISTINE PELISEK

Ever wonder why a leg of the Red Line ends at Wilshire and Normandie, miles short of the museums and office buildings that would make it worthwhile to thousands? His name is Henry Waxman. Back in 1986, a year after a methane explosion at a Ross Dress for Less, the powerful Westside Democrat got Congress to ban the use of federal funds for tunneling in the area. Nineteen years later, talk of extending the Red Line to the sea is a dream of City Council and mayoral candidates. The Westside is finally fed up with congestion and no longer opposes a subway or other rail projects. Last week, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority voted 11-2 to look at a subway expansion, the first step in overcoming the legal and financial obstacles to the Red Line's advance along Wilshire Boulevard. The measure, sponsored by Los Angeles City Councilman Tom LaBonge, will urge the MTA to find ways to overturn Waxman's federal ban and rescind a 1998 voter-approved measure, pushed by Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, which bars the use of local sales-tax dollars on the subway. CHRISTINE PELISEK, in this telephone interview, nailed down Waxman's current thinking on high-speed travel for commuters.

L.A. WEEKLY: *Last year, the City Council passed a motion urging a reversal of the laws banning the Red Line extension and directed city staff to work with the MTA. Has anyone called you?*

HENRY WAXMAN: I talked to Councilman Tom LaBonge. He asked me if I would reconsider the prohibition against drilling in the Fairfax-Wilshire area, where there had been very high methane-gas levels underground. I told him that in 1994 I agreed to revisit that issue. I had discussions with the MTA then about setting up an independent panel to look into the safety concerns, which were my only concerns. The MTA backed down and said they weren't interested anymore, because they didn't have the funding for it. But I told him I am open to doing the exact same thing that I promised in 1994, which is to allow for an independent evaluation of new technologies which many people have assured me would permit the tunneling to be done safely.

Transportation is a big issue in the mayoral campaigns, and several candidates have brought up moving the Red Line to the sea. It seems to be gaining momentum.

I talked to Antonio Villaraigosa, a longtime friend of mine and a person I am supporting for mayor, and he said his transportation plan includes a subway in the area. I don't have a problem with that, and we would lift the federal prohibition once we determine that it is safe.

Congestion has reached a breaking point, no?

Absolutely.

You feel any responsibility for that?

No. I didn't think very much of the whole subway plan as an alternative to using the money for other ways to reduce traffic. It struck me that the Metro Rail system, which is the most expensive subway system in the history of the world, wouldn't have really solved our problems. We needed to get people out of their cars on the freeways for much further distances than the subway was projected to go. But I have been away from these issues for some time, and I would gladly follow the leadership of people who spent more time looking at it, like Villaraigosa and others. If they feel that a transportation system would make sense to tunnel through the Wilshire area, I will leave it to them to make that decision as long as there is not a safety concern.

They have also argued that the science has changed.

I want to know more about it.

Have you kept in contact with the MTA?

No, not really. My staff may have talked to a staff member at MTA. I haven't had much conversation with them about this in the last 11 years.

Do you want a subway to the sea?

I am not sure. If we are going to have a subway, it certainly makes sense to go all the way down Wilshire to the sea to downtown.

You have any interest in taking the initiative to make sure the subway plan works?

I am not going to take the initiative to make the subway plan work, because it all has to be part of a broader transportation decision-making plan which is basically at the local level and not the federal level . . . There is an MTA, and it has a local government that is supposed to make these decisions. It is up to them.

The late Julian Dixon was the region's strongest subway advocate in Congress. Who is L.A.'s strongest subway advocate now?

No one has been able to replace Dixon. He was a great champion of the subway systems and other concerns around the L.A. area.

You want the honor some day?

No. It is not my area. Dixon was on the appropriations committee. They were the ones

getting the funds. I am much more focused on health and environmental issues. I am not on the committees, nor is it my area of expertise.

You worry about going down in history as the biggest foe of modern-day subway transportation?

I don't think that is true. I think that the people who designed the most expensive subway in the history of the world, that has seen cost overruns and environmental problems and a negative public reaction to it — I think they have to answer for a lot of these concerns. The vote of the people in the L.A. area rejected putting more funds into the subway, and it didn't have anything to do with me particularly, but the fact that they lost faith in it.

Can their faith be restored?

I am not sure. But it is up to the MTA and the leaders in the area to figure out a plan we can afford, and it could provide opportunities for people to not have to be in their vehicles all the time. You do have to step back and wonder about the people who designed a subway system that doesn't get you to the L.A. Airport.